NEW DESCRIPTIONS

A NEW SPECIES OF *OLIGODON* FROM THE PALNI HILLS, SOUTH INDIA (SERPENTES: COLUBRIDAE)[1]

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(With a plate)

INTRODUCTION

While on a herpetological survey of the Palni Hills, South India, we collected a hitherto unreported species of kukri snake of *Oligodon* along with several other interesting reptiles and amphibians. It is named here as:

Oligodon nikhili sp. nov.

Description:

Seven supralabials, the third and the fourth touching the eye; the sixth rising slightly above the labial border; one anterior temporal; internasals present, loreal absent; nostril in elongated nasal completely divided by a vertical suture. Scales around mid body in fifteen rows. Ventrals: 144; Caudals: 33, paired; anal divided.

Hemipenis extending to the 13th caudal plate; proximal quarter of the organ smooth, the next quarter with equal sized spines and the distal half flounced, the flounces edged with numerous small spines; three prominent longitudinal folds present.

Colour:

Ground colour light brown, each scale with a minute black speck. Two chocolate brown dorso-lateral stripes 1.5 scales wide extending from the posterior end of the characteristic chevron head pattern to the tip of the tail. Two indistinct lateral lines on scale row three, extending from above the fifth ventral to the anal plate; belly whitish with prominent ventero-lateral speckling and two broken lines of black spots.

Holotype:

Museum of the Madras Snake Park Trust, an adult male from Tiger shola, 1500 mts., Palni Hills, Tamilnadu, South India, 20.9.81, collected by Romulus and Zahida Whitaker and Shekar Dattatri. No other specimens reported.

Measurements:

Snout-vent: 350 mm
Vent-tail: 73 mm
Total length: 423 mm
Head length: 11 mm
Head width: 9 mm
Neck width: 8 mm
Diameter of eye: 2 mm

Scalation:

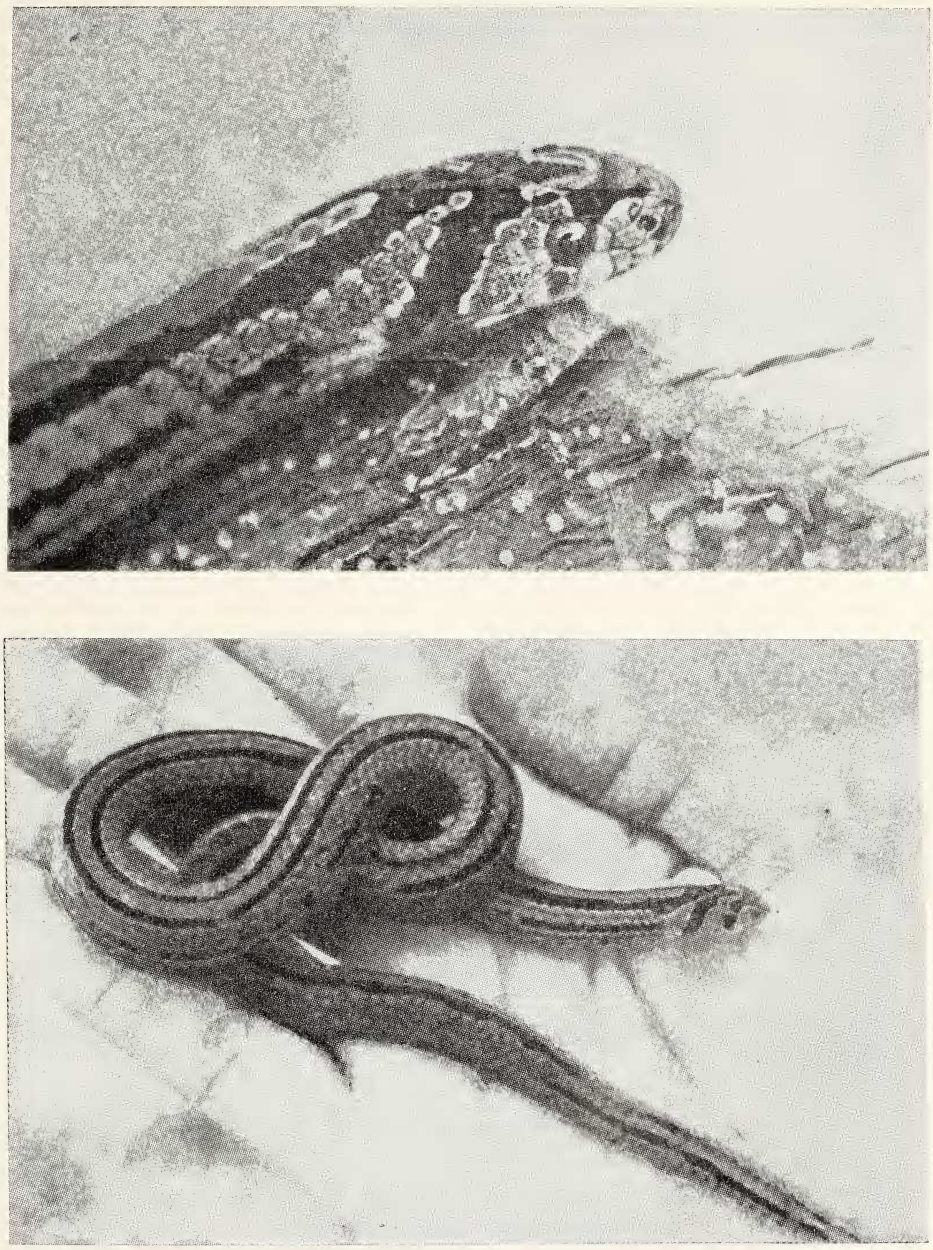
Ventrals: 144
Caudals: 33
Scale rows: 17-15-15

DIAGNOSIS AND DISCUSSION

The cylindrical body with smooth scales, presence of the nostril in an elongated nasal, one pre- and two post-oculars, circular pupil of eye, typical head shape and pattern esta-

[1] Accepted September 1982.

[2] Madras Snake Park Trust, Madras 600 022.



Oligodon nikhili sp. nov. from Palni Hills, Tamil Nadu.
(Photos: *Rom Whitaker*)

blish beyond doubt that this snake belongs to the Genus *Oligodon*.

Of the 33 species of this Genus recorded from the oriental region, eleven other species have 15 scale rows at mid-body. Tabulated below are the differences exhibited by the holotype compared to the most similar forms.

Character	*O. taeniolatus*	*brevicaudata*	*erythrorachis*	*sublineatus*	new species
1. Supra labials:	7	7	7	7	7
2. Scale rows:	15	15	15	15	15
3. Ventrals:	158-218	158-173	154	134-161	144
4. Caudals:	29-56	25-29	46	23-37	33
5. Loreals:	present	absent	absent	present	absent
6. Inter nasals:	present	absent	present	present	present
7. Distribution	India Sri Lanka	Western Ghats	Assam	Sri Lanka	Western Ghats

From the characters enumerated above, it is evident that the new species closely resembles *O. erythrorachis* described by Wall (1910) based on a single specimen collected in Assam. However, it differs from the latter in coloration and in the ventral and subcaudal counts.

The next most closely resembling species is *O. sublineatus* described from Sri Lanka. However, *O. sublineatus* differs in having complete head shields and in the hemipenis being spinose throughout, the spines being almost uniform in size and regularly arranged. This is not the case with the new species.

Habitat:

Tiger shola, where our specimen was collected, is a medium altitude rain forest (1500 mts. above MSL) a few kilometres below Shembaganur on the Kodaikanal ghat road. It remains one of the few intact pockets of 'shola' forest in the area and on the same trip we collected five species uropeltids (*Uropeltis, Platyplectrurus* and *Teretrurus* spp.), one species of *Xylophis*, several forest frogs and lizards. The new kukri snake was found by the three year old son of one of us (R.W.), Nikhil, who was left at the roadside to play at "snake hunting". The snake was hiding behind a piece of cement on the roadside retaining wall and fell at the child's feet when he removed the loose slab of cement.

Conclusion

When we started out on this trip, a new species of snake was the last thing we expected. Our discovery shows only too clearly that a great deal lies hidden in the complex and unique forest hill ranges of the Western ghats. It is appalling to see the destruction man has wrought in many of these areas. Hill slopes that were lush with vegetation in the senior author's younger days are deforested, barren, hot and eroded today. What we are losing in terms of our fauna and flora is anybody's guess.

Acknowledgement

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Reference

Wall, F. (1910): A new snake from Assam.. *Oligodon erythrorhachis*. *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 19*: 923-924.